

SPOTLIGHT ON NEW ZEALAND / QUEENSTOWN



Kiwi magic

After spending a week in Queenstown, the ‘adventure capital of the world’ on the South Island, Gi’s **Peter Swain** was sold on the quality of life New Zealand has to offer

If you want to buy a property on a world-class golf course in an English-speaking destination with British traditions and laws, a low crime rate, a stable economy, and great weather from September to April, your choices are a tad limited.

The Caribbean is a perennial favourite, but unless you’ve got a million or so to spare, it’s not really a goer. South Africa has the weather and the courses but also the highest murder rate of any country not currently at war. Florida? Well maybe, but US prices have fallen by 50% over the past five years and no one knows if they’ve stabilized yet. Canada has eight-month winters.

Australia just about fits the bill, and many Brits are attracted by the breezy

informality and outdoor lifestyle. But it’s incredibly hot in their summer/our winter, it’s full of poisonous critters, and let’s be honest here, there’s no love lost between the Diggers and the Poms.

So there’s really only one answer: New Zealand. Here’s a country that not only embraces traditional British virtues, but is incredibly beautiful – most of Lord of the Rings and the upcoming Hobbit were filmed there – and has some stunning golf courses. Oh yes, and it produces some of the best wines on the planet.

First problem: ‘It’s miles away.’ Well yes, it does take 24 hours to get there, but thankfully golf-friendly Air New Zealand is regularly voted the world’s best long-haul carrier. You can break the trip halfway in either LA or Hong Kong, and as long as you’re going for a month or more, the time difference isn’t really an issue.

I recently spent a week in Queenstown, the ‘adventure capital of the world’, in

Central Otago, South Island, on the occasion of the NZ PGA. Played at the immaculate Hills course that has hosted the NZ Open, it was a delight to see that Sir Bob Charles, the 1963 Open Champion at Lytham, hadn’t lost his competitive edge in the Pro-Am.

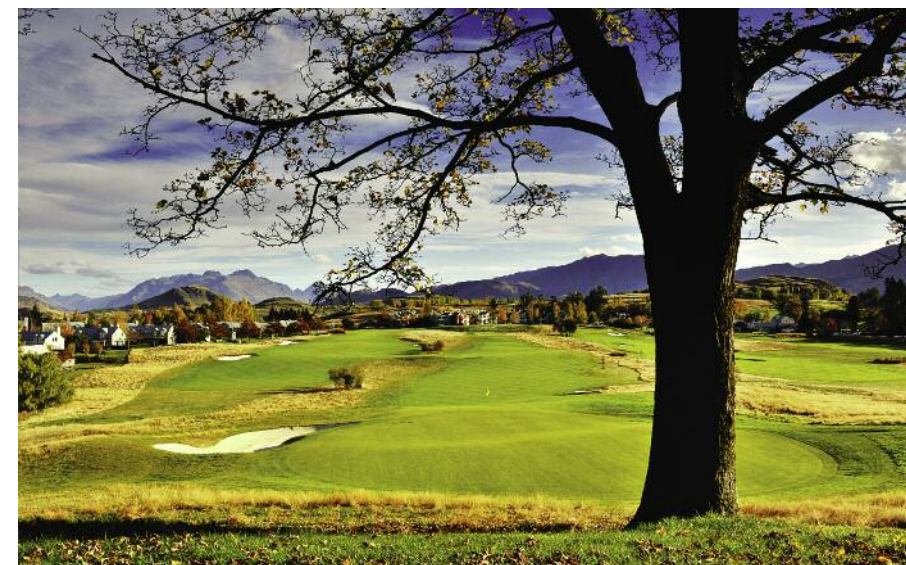
The first day of serious competition took place at Jack’s Point, a spectacular set-up running along the banks of Lake Wakatipu, under the lee of the 7,500-foot snow-topped Remarkables mountain range.

Designed by John Darby, it’s a 6,906-yard masterpiece that meanders across rolling hills covered in tussocky grass, dotted with dramatic rocky outcrops. With dramatic scenery, good separation between holes, and vast brown-top greens in excellent condition, it bears comparison with Lock Lomond or Kingsbarns.

Through nationwide country-house specialists Baileys, a Christies International affiliate, good-sized plots overlooking the



A golfer’s paradise: views such as these are two a penny all across this fabulous country. (Clockwise from far left): Jack’s Point enjoys a stunning position along Lake Wakatipu; the futuristic clubhouse at the Hills Golf club; the development at Milbrook Country Club – with its Bob Charles-designed course (pictured below) features a number of two-bedroom villas and beautiful stone Tarn detached houses. The ski slopes of the Southern Alps are just 15 minutes away



course start at only NZ\$215,000 (£128,000), with a minimum of about the same again to build a house. I saw a couple of modernist palaces on the lake featuring plenty of stone, wood and glass that would cost three or four times as much, and I can honestly say I’ve never seen a more striking location.

I should briefly add at this point that after I played the course with an Aussie golf writer, we were both persuaded to skydive for the very first time from 15,000ft. When asked if he wanted to jump, he replied ‘Yeah, no worries’, and so as national pride was at stake, I, er, had to take the plunge.

Local fliers NZone looked after us well, and after the initial wave of terror wore off, it was fascinating to get, quite literally, a bird’s eye view of Jack’s Point. Afterwards we headed to nearby Amisfield winery for a prolonged victory drink, and I can honestly say it was the first time I’ve played 18 holes, thrown myself out of plane and enjoyed a Pinot Noir tasting, all in the same

day. That's NZ for you.

From the air, I also saw the 500-acre Millbrook Country Club, which features an 18-hole Bob Charles-designed championship course, and a new 9-hole loop created by Greg Turner. The topography has something of Devon about it – Dartmouth Golf Club springs to mind – with streams, schist stone outcrops, elevation changes and trees providing the challenges.

Opened in 1993, it's now a mature set-up with an active social side, especially at weekends, so British members feel completely at home. As well as the golf, they can enjoy a 25m indoor heated pool, a magnificent spa, grass tennis courts and three restaurants. The pro shop will even renovate your hickory clubs.

Millbrook was recently judged one of the Top Five Golf Resorts Worldwide. Its hotel features cosy rooms in the Village Inn, and spacious two-bedroom apartments called Hotel Villas, several of which are on the market for NZ\$595,000 (£352,000). One of the advantages of Queenstown is that while golf and adventure sports feature in the summer, the ski slopes of the Southern Alps are only 15 minutes away in the winter, so there's the potential for good all-year-round rental income.

If I had a spare NZ\$1.85m (£1.21m) I'd snap up a stone McEntyres Tarn. These stone and timber 3,000ft four-bedroom open-plan houses are designed for both summer and winter living, with fireplaces inside and out. Several have been bought by extended Kiwi and UK families clubbing together to share the cost.

'There's no CGT or stamp duty in NZ,' reports Millbrook's property man, Ben O'Malley, 'and so far 90% of the 175 properties built here are second homes.' He admits that his prices are 15% lower than peak (in Queenstown proper the figure is nearer 40%), but NZ has so far missed the worst excesses of the global financial crisis.

Another city, five hours north, has seen a crash of an altogether different magnitude. Two earthquakes in late 2010 and early 2011 decimated the centre of Christchurch, but with a NZ\$30 billion (£18 billion) renovation plan about to be implemented, the city will be the biggest construction project in the southern hemisphere over the next decade.

Upwards of 35,000 builders, architects, engineers and associated professionals, many from the UK, will descend, and the main question they'll ask, of course, is: what's the golf like?

Well, on the edge of town, the 7,137-yard Clearwater course currently hosts the NZ



(Above): The Hills Golf Club, Queenstown
(Left): Property surrounding the Clearwater Golf Club, Christchurch, starts from around £160,000. Hurling down from 15,000ft, Gi's property editor finds himself out of his normal comfort zone
(Below): The 8th green at Jack's Point, a gem that bears comparison with Loch Lomond and Kingbarns

FACT BOX:

Daily London to Auckland flights cost from £816 return, airnewzealand.co.uk

3 nights in the Queentown Hilton, with 2 rounds of golf, starts at £815

USEFUL CONTACTS

bayleysqueenstown.co.uk
millbrook.co.nz
nzsothebysrealty.com

Open, and it's magnificent. Another John Darby design in association with Bob Charles, who also has a house there, it's a tough Florida-style parkland set-up with flawless fairways threaded between artificial lakes, leading to vast greens protected by aggressive bunkering.

One-bed Lakeview Villas start at NZ\$265,000 (£160,000), with the popular two-bedroom models fetching NZ\$495,000 (£300,000). 'With the airport nearby and rental property at a premium in Christchurch, 6-7% rental returns are realistic,' reckons the local Sotheby's agent, Brian

Brakenridge, who also has a variety of plots to sell. Family club membership is NZ\$2,800 (£1,700) a year

If New Zealand was any closer to Europe or America, it would be a world-famous golf destination. But actually, that's part of its charm: with relatively few players, the courses are beautifully presented, the weather pleasant, people unfailingly polite and hospitable, and the food and wine on a par with Italy.

All in all, what with Euro chaos and Leveson meltdown, I'm quite tempted to emigrate. 🇳🇿